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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the implementation and evaluation of a social competence promotion program conducted in the sixth grade of a middle school. The need to increase social competence within the school arose from the results of enumerative and stakeholder data collected at the school. This paper outlines the steps of the needs assessment, program selection, implementation issues, and preliminary outcome data. The Social Competence Promotion Program for Young Adolescents: Social Problem-Solving Module (Weissberg, Caplan, Bennetto, & Jackson, 1990) was selected based on the match between the needs assessment data and research literature on the program. Factors considered in helping implement the program included support from the administration, teacher buy-in, training, program initiation with students, support to the teachers, and parental involvement. Mid-year data showed positive changes in problem-solving knowledge of complex items. However, significant differences were not found in probed problem-solving knowledge of simple items, free recall using problem-solving skills, or in student attitudes. (Contains 11 references and six appendixes.) (Author/JDM)

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Improving Social Competence in a Middle School

Mary Levinsohn, M.A.
John M. Klyap, M.S.

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We gratefully acknowledge the support provided by the National Education Association and the Howard County Education Association.

Mary Levinsohn is a doctoral student in the School Psychology program at the University of Maryland College Park and John M. Klyap is a school psychologist in Howard County Public Schools in Maryland. Correspondences concerning this presentation should be addressed to ML136@umail.umd.edu or jklyap@aol.com.

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Abstract

The purpose of this research is to describe the implementation and program evaluation of a social competence promotion program conducted in the sixth grade of a middle school. The need to increase social competence within the school arose out of enumerative and stakeholder data collected at the school. This paper will outline the steps of the needs assessment, program selection, implementation issues, and preliminary outcome data. The Social Competence Promotion Program for Young Adolescents: Social Problem-Solving Module (Weissberg, Caplan, Bennetto, & Jackson, 1990) was selected based on the match between the needs assessment data and research literature on the program. Midyear data show positive changes in probed problem-solving knowledge of complex items. However, significant differences were not found in probed problem-solving knowledge of simple items, free recall using problem-solving skills, or in student attitudes. Implications for implementation are discussed.

Improving Social Competence in a Middle School

Addressing the challenging behaviors of students presents a major concern for school psychologists. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, 78 percent of school principals reported having some type of formal violence prevention or reduction program within their school (U.S. Department of Education, 1998). The means by which challenging behaviors are addressed differs. When a national sample of school principals were asked the type of programs used within their school to prevent or reduce school violence, 89 percent reported a prevention curriculum, instruction, or training for students (e.g., social skills training) (U.S. Department of Education, 1998). The question then becomes how do these specific programs get selected, implemented, and evaluated. More importantly, how successfully do the programs address the goals of the school professionals for decreasing school violence and increasing social competence among the students? The purpose of this research is to report the process by which a social competence program was selected, implemented, and evaluated in the sixth grade of a middle school.

Program selection

Needs assessment

The first step in this research was to conduct a needs assessment to help operationalize the problem. Two types of data were collected - 1) enumerative data and 2) stakeholder data. The enumerative data provided information on school suspensions, detentions, peer mediations, and guidance referrals. To collect the stakeholder data, the principal, guidance counselors, and sixth grade team leader

were interviewed regarding student behavior concerns. These sources were used to determine themes. The converging data showed that the sixth grade students had difficulties at school around behavior and independent social problem-solving. From this, we established the goal of increasing students' independent problem-solving abilities and positive behavior, and decreasing negative/aggressive behavior. An additional goal was to provide primary prevention. Weissberg and Greenberg (1998) describe primary prevention as "programs [used to] reduce the incidence of problems through group - or population-oriented interventions, rather than targeting individuals who exhibit behavioral and emotional symptoms" (p. 893).

Research support

Once the goals of the program were determined, it was necessary to go into the literature and select a program that fit the needs of the school. It became evident that an ecological-based program would best fit the needs of primary prevention and of the school. Weissberg and Greenberg (1998) suggest that competence promotion programs are more effective if they make positive changes in the environment, instead of focusing solely on changing the child. Ecologically oriented programs "emphasize the teaching of skills, fostering meaningful opportunities to use skills, and establishing structures to reinforce effective skill application" (pp. 913-914).

In addition, the research indicates that information or knowledge-only programs have minimal effects on children's behavior (e.g., Kirby, 1992; Tobler, 1986). In contrast, programs that teach broadly applicable personal and social competence have been linked in the research with benefits around children's social

adjustment, assertiveness and aggressive behavior, peer sociability, and handling stressors (e.g., Elias et al., 1986). These broadly applicable social competencies include problem-solving, self-control, stress management, decision making, and communication.

We selected the Social Competence Promotion Program for Young Adolescents: Social Problem-Solving Module (Weissberg, Caplan, Bennetto, & Jackson, 1990) because it fit the above-mentioned categories, and had research data to support its efficacy. The implementation of this program has been linked with greater understanding of behavioral consequences, sensitivity to others feelings, and easier middle school adjustment (Elias & Weissberg, 1990); positive effects on handling interpersonal problems and coping with anxiety (Caplan, Weissberg, Grober, Sivo, Grady, & Jacoby, 1992); increased number and effectiveness of planning alternative solutions to problem situations (cited in Weissberg & Greenberg, 1998); and teacher rating of students higher in resolving peer conflicts, impulse control, and popularity (Weissberg & Caplan, 1994).

Program Implementation

In his work on system-wide innovation and change, Fullan (1991) describes the three Rs, Readiness, Resources, and Relevance. This helped frame our initiation around implementation. In addition, we were guided by Sarason's (1996) writings on the importance of understanding school culture when attempting to institute change.

Administrative support is crucial when attempting an innovation in the school. The support from the principal provided resources both in terms of staff

and monetary.

Teacher buy-in is also crucial because the teachers will be teaching the program directly to the students. To facilitate this process, we included the teachers to be part of the implementation and planning and to provide us with continual feedback. We helped them understand the relevance of the program to their goals as teachers. It was important that the teachers were comfortable with teaching the curriculum and modeling the problem-solving steps. We helped them understand how the children develop in their use of the problem-solving concepts and that "overnight" changes are not to be expected.

Training was conducted with the teachers before and after program implementation. The pre-implementation training was to familiarize the teachers with the curriculum. The post-implementation training was to instruct the teachers on how to model and reinforce the problem-solving process. The person who conducted the training had 9 years of experience teaching and facilitating the implementation of the curriculum in another school district. Before the training, we surveyed the teachers to determine their needs. The trainer used that information, as well as information about the school culture to guide her workshops. The workshops were rated as highly effective by the teachers.

Introduction/Initiation To prepare the students for the problem-solving lessons, two overview activities were conducted prior to curriculum implementation. First, students were given an overview of the problem-solving model in a classroom lesson taught by the first and second authors. The students explored the importance of problem solving in their lives and were introduced to

the curriculum's six problem-solving steps. Second, the students were given an opportunity to demonstrate what they had learned about the problem-solving steps by performing role plays in front of their peers. These readiness activities allowed the students to become familiar with the program, understand its relevance in their lives, and begin practicing the problem-solving steps.

Support to the teachers was first determined by surveying the teachers about their needs. As the program facilitators, we provided support by assisting in the classroom when problem-solving was taught, answering questions, providing materials (e.g., consumables, workbooks, overheads), and providing incidental support and reinforcers (e.g., lunch, food).

Parental component was incorporated through letters sent home to all parents about the problem-solving lessons and updates in the Parent Teacher Association (PTA) Newsletter.

Treatment integrity was established by conducting bi-weekly classroom observations during the problem-solving lessons. In addition, all teachers were provided with the problem-solving curriculum and workbooks for all of their students.

Maintenance and generalization was the goal of the second half of the year. First, the teachers were trained in the second workshop in several methods to use in the classroom to encourage maintenance and generalization. For example, the teachers were taught and all role played the Dialoguing technique. This is a technique where the teacher (adult) "walks through" all the problem-solving steps with a child who has come to the teacher with a problem. Second, a problem-

solving poster contest was sponsored to encourage the students to use their problem-solving knowledge. A group of four sixth graders worked with us to help plan and implement the contest. Third, the problem-solving posters and other banners were displayed across the school. Fourth, students filled out problem-solving worksheets in Reading class as part of the classwork. Fifth, teachers were asked to nominate the Best Problem-Solver of Week. This encourages teachers to continually think about problem-solving in the classroom, as well as getting the students involved and recognized.

Program Evaluation

Several sources of data were collected to determine program effectiveness. First, enumerative data will be collected at the end of the school year and compared with last year's data.

Second, pre-implementation, post-implementation, and end-of-year surveys were administered to students. The surveys had three areas: 1) probed problem-solving didactic knowledge; 2) free recall using problem-solving skills; and 3) attitudes of areas related in the literature to better problem-solving skills, such as attitudes toward fighting, school, and so forth.

As anticipated, no major differences have been seen between pre- and post-implementation. The only notable difference thus far is in the probed problem-solving didactic knowledge. While no differences exist in the simple questions (e.g., What is a solution?), differences at post-implementation exist in the more complex items (e.g., Circle all the different ways why it is important to think of lots of different solutions to problems?). This indicates that after receiving the lessons,

students have a more integrated level of problem-solving knowledge.

Differences will likely be seen in comparing pre-implementation with year-end data. In addition, Weissberg and Caplan (1994) found that two years of implementation is greatly preferable to one year. Consequently, plans are being made for an additional implementation next year.

Third, anecdotal responses from teachers were collected several times during the school year. In general, we found that the teachers who had "bought into" the program initially were more enthusiastic about teaching the program, reported greater student enthusiasm about the lessons, and were more willing to model the process post-implementation.

Finally, we held informal "focus group" meetings with several groups of students after implementation. They reported liking the lessons in general, with their favorite parts being the role plays and working in groups. The students reported not liking the worksheets and doing independent seatwork. This information will help us plan for next year's implementation.

Resources

There are several resources available to school personnel interested in implementing a program similar to the one we have described. The references at the end of this paper provide several key articles. In addition, searching ERIC, PsychLit, or PsychInfo can provide germane literature. We also recommend looking carefully at the curriculum that you choose and see how it fits with your schools needs, culture, and resources. We found that the of use outside consultants who

have expertise in program implementation to be very useful. In addition, the program developer can provide needed information and tips. Finally, having professional support through supervision, and the like, can be extremely helpful when attempting any innovation in the schools.

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Figure 11

Dear Parents,

As part of the 6th grade Advisory (MASE) at Elkridge Landing Middle School, your child will be participating in a series of lessons focusing on problem solving. These lessons will help your child learn skills that will help him/her get along better with other people. These problem solving skills can help your child handle social situations successfully at school, at home, and later on when he/she has a job.

Social problem-solving is an important part of everyone's life. Good problem solvers feel better about themselves and what they do. Students will learn the following steps for solving problems:

1. Stop, calm down, and think before you act.
2. Say the problem and how you feel.
3. Set a positive goal.
4. Think of lots of solutions.
5. Think ahead to the consequences.
6. Go ahead and try the best plan.

We hope you will find this program interesting and helpful for your child. As the lessons progress, we will be sending home letters to let you know what your child is learning and to give you suggestions for activities you may do with your child at home.

Please do not hesitate to call, if you have questions.

Sincerely,

The Sixth Grade Team

Figure 6

12/98

Please think of a problem situation that YOU had within the past month.

For example, you want to go outside and play, but you have homework to do.
Another example, somebody calls you a name on the bus.

Describe the situation:

What were the steps you took to resolve the problem situation. Please be as specific as you can.

Problem Solving

1. Match the following words to the correct definition by drawing a line from the word its definition.

a.	Goal	1. A way to solve a problem
b.	Consequence	2. How you want things to end up
c.	Solution	3. What happens after you do something

2. Mary wants to listen to her brother's favorite CD, but is afraid that her brother won't let her have it. Which of the following is the best goal for Mary to set?

   a. To find a way to get the CD without her brother knowing
   b. To find a way to get the CD even if it makes her brother angry
   c. To find a way to get the CD with her brother's approval

3. True or False

   a. There is only one good way to solve a problem. T or F

   b. Everyone feels the same way about things that happen to them. T or F

4. Circle <u>all the different</u> why it is important to think of lots of different solutions to problems.

   a. If your first solution doesn't work, you can try another one that you thought of
   b. Your first solution may not be the best one
   c. It gives you something to do
   d. Thinking of lots of ideas can help you to come up with a really good solution

5. Circle <u>all the different ways</u> you can tell if a solution is a good one.

   a. By asking everybody you know
   b. If it leads to good consequences for you and the other person
   c. If it helps you to reach a positive, realistic goal
   d. If it gets you what you want, but may hurt the other person
   e. If it makes the situation better

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For each question, please circle ONE answer that is most true to you. There are no right or wrong answers.

1. I like school
1 Definitely not true
2 Mostly not true
3 Mostly true
4 Definitely true

2. I like most of my teachers this year
1 Definitely not true
2 Mostly not true
3 Mostly true
4 Definitely true

3. I feel safe at my school
1 Definitely not true
2 Mostly not true
3 Mostly true
4 Definitely true

4. Teachers spend a lot of time in class trying to get students to behave.
1 Definitely not true
2 Mostly not true
3 Mostly true
4 Definitely true

5. There is a lot of fighting between students in or around the school.
1 Definitely not true
2 Mostly not true
3 Mostly true
4 Definitely true

The next section is made up of sentences that people your age may use to describe themselves. They are listed to help you describe your thoughts, feelings, and actions.

6. I am good at making new friends
1 True
2 False

7. I like to argue
1 True
2 False

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8. I am a likable person
1 True
2 False

9. I have been in the principal's office at least five times, for being in trouble.
1 True
2 False

10. I am good at making decisions.
1 True
2 False

11. I need help to get along with others.
1 True
2 False

12. People think I am fun to be with.
1 True
2 False

13. My classmates don't like me.
1 True
2 False

14. Other kids hate to be with me.
1 True
2 False

15. I like to make decisions on my own.
1 True
2 False

16. I get into fights at school.
1 True
2 False

17. In the last school year (in 5th grade), how many times have you started a fist fight or shoving match?
0 times
1 time
2 times
3-4 times
5 or more times

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18. Do you think you should fight if someone insults you in front of your friends?

1 no
2 probably not
3 probably yes
4 yes

19. Do you think you should fight if someone hits you?

1 no
2 probably not
3 probably yes
4 yes

20. Do you think you should fight if someone insults someone in your family?

1 no
2 probably not
3 probably yes
4 yes

21. Do you think you should fight if someone steals something from you?

1 no
2 probably not
3 probably yes
4 yes

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BECOMING A SUCCESSFUL PROBLEM SOLVER

1. My problem was _____

   _____

2. The people involved were _____ _____ _____

3. Before the problem was solved:

   a. My stress level was _____ on a 1 (low) to 10 (high) scale.

   b. I felt _____ and _____

   c. The other people felt _____ and _____

4. My goal was _____

5. My solution was (what I did or said) _____

   _____

6. Was the problem solved? _____

7. If the problem was not solved, what are some different solutions you could have tried? Think ahead to the consequences of each solution.

SOLUTION		CONSEQUENCE
a._____	--->	_____
b._____	--->	_____
c._____	--->	_____

8. Which solution do you think is best? _____

9. Why do you think it is best? _____

10. When are you going to try it? _____

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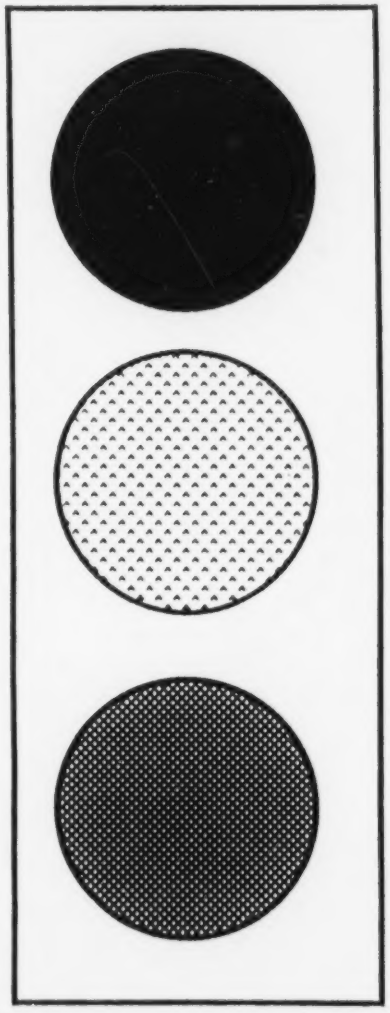
WHEN YOU HAVE A PROBLEM:



STOP, CALM DOWN, & THINK
before you act

say the PROBLEM **and how you** FEEL

set a POSITIVE GOAL

think of lots of SOLUTIONS

think ahead to the CONSEQUENCES

GO **ahead and** TRY **the** BEST PLAN

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Unit 1 — SRS 1990-91
Lesson 1
Wall Chart #2